

# Liberia

## Negro & Savage in the West African Republic

By Hamilton Fyfe

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**L**IBERIA, the negro republic of West Africa, once known as the Grain Coast, from the discovery there of the pepper shrub, lies to the east of the British colony of Sierra Leone. To the north is French Guinea; eastward, the Ivory Coast, also French. The long, jade-green rollers of the North Atlantic throw their white foam over treacherous rocks upon the yellow sands of the coastal belt, which extends for some 350 to 400 miles, from north-west to south-east. A score of rivers, swarming with fish, abounding in rapids, and varying from 50 to 300 miles in length, water the country. There are bars at the mouths of all of these waterways, while only five—the Kavalli, Mano, St. Paul, St. John, and Dukwia—are navigable for small craft, and this only partially. Landing is dangerous everywhere except at the capital, Monrovia.

Marshes, lagoons (notably Fisher-man's Lake), grassy plains and tropical growths—green mangoes, glossy bread-fruit, and graceful palms—distinguish the coastal strip, which stretches inland for some thirty to forty miles, and here are

the scattered towns, farms, and settlements of the ruling race, in part (about 12,000) descendants of the original negro and mulatto settlers from the United States of America, in part (some 40,000) the educated natives, with whom the newcomers from the other side of the Atlantic intermarried.

Beyond the area of Europeanised civilization, 3,500 square miles in extent, the country is inhabited by many tribes—Mandingo, Vai, Gola, Mpesse or Kpwesi, and different tribes of the

Kru stock—vaguely estimated at between 700,000 and 2,000,000, whose forest clearings account for another 2,500 square miles. The rest of the total area of 38,400 square miles or so is still very largely a terra incognita of mountain gorge and damp and dismal, almost impenetrable forest, except for the rich savanna plateau of the Mandingo country.

The climate is, perhaps, a shade less trying than that of Sierra Leone. For six months of the year, from February until May, and during November and December, the coast is swept by tropical storms. In April torrential rains



**BLACK BEAUTY OF MONROVIA**

Stylishly gowned and coiffured, this young lady has charms exceptional among women of Kru origin, who are usually very unattractive physically and have lamentable lack of taste in dress

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WITCH-DOCTOR IN HIS WIZARD PANOPLY

In Liberia's forest-choked interior the witch-doctor and medicine-man wield considerable influence among certain tribes. One of their duties consists in administering poison to suspected evil-doers and giving judgement according to its effects

begin, and, save for a break in August, they pour down with maddening persistency until November, the annual rainfall varying from 150 inches near the sea to 100 inches inland. The prevailing atmosphere is one of vaporous humidity, amid which tropical vegetation springs up, rank and often poisonous, even grass growing to a height of twenty-five feet.

The jigger and the guinea-worm are ever present with the ubiquitous

mosquito, and fever and worse diseases attack the unwary whites who allow themselves to stray from the strict path of abstinence and unremitting precaution, while malaria makes victims of all save the indigenous natives; the Liberians proper are little less immune from malaria than Europeans.

Of the four counties into which the State is divided—Montserrado, Grand Bassa, Sinoe, and Maryland—the first and largest contains the capital, Monrovia, beautifully situated, near Cape Montserrado, on the shores of a lagoon and east of the mouth of the St. Paul river. Named after President Monroe, founder of the famous doctrine, Monrovia has a population of about 6,000, and is divided into five long streets, rising one above the other and running parallel with the water front. The streets are still rocky and grassy, and are used for grazing goats; sometimes cattle may be seen cropping in them. There being no outlet from the town by road, there are no vehicles, at all

events none in daily use, so it would be a work of supererogation to put the roads in order. It is a smelly, insanitary place, but it has a rather pleasant appearance. The houses, usually of two storeys, are mostly solid, built of brick and tiled or iron-roofed, with pillared balconies and gardens, on which a good deal of care is spent.

Among the other townships or settlements are Robertsport, at the foot of the



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beautifully-wooded Cape Mount (1,100 feet) ; Harper, the chief town of Maryland, near Cape Palmas, situated amid luxuriant tropical vegetation ; Grand Bassa or Lower Buchanan ; Krutown, Greenville, Marshall, and Edina, so named in 1834 in recognition of aid from Scotland's capital.

The religious life of Liberia is an outstanding feature promoted by American missions, and there are many schools, well attended by native children, controlled partly by Government or supported by missions, in addition to a Government college. Elections to Senate and House of Representatives are by ballot, and every male citizen of twenty-one years of age possessing real estate has the right of suffrage and the potential privilege of office. No person is entitled to hold real estate unless he is a citizen.

One quarter of Monrovia is given over to Krumen, known on board ship as Kruboyes. They belong to a tribe which has never been enslaved, never allowed its members to be carried off. The men wear a "mark of freedom" to commemorate this ; it is a cut on the forehead made when they are boys, and always visible. The Krus, however, in past times helped to take away the liberty of others. They supplied the slave merchants with regular gangs of prisoners, and gave the early pioneers of Liberia a vast amount of trouble when the latter were fighting this traffic in human beings.

Their methods are illustrated by the account of a raid given in a report to the American Colonisation Society. A certain chief agreed with a French slave-trader to exchange for goods a number of



### GROTESQUE MASKS AND FANTASY THAT GARB THE DEVIL DANCERS

Among the non-Mahomedan tribes witch-finding and devil-dancing are still existent in Liberia, and here is shown a group of natives disguised with every fantastic distortion of human semblance that savage imagination can contrive. On moonlight nights such may be seen by the venturesome flitting in and out among the shadows, and it is well for the observer if he himself be unobserved





LIBERIAN MUSICIANS CHARMING A CRITICAL AUDIENCE WITH A DUET UPON BALAFONS

Keys of hard wood imposed on sound-boxes of gourds constitute an elementary form of piano called balafon by the natives of Liberia. Instruments almost identical in construction are common throughout Africa, and those in use amongst the Swahilis and some of the Bantu-speaking peoples are represented on pages 702 and 723. The tone produced by these instruments is similar to that of the xylophone, and though it can hardly be described as musical it affords great pleasure to the native virtuosi and to their audiences

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young blacks. When the time for the fulfilment of the bargain drew near, the chief found that he was short of the number required. He therefore sent out a force to surround the settlements of a mild, agricultural tribe, and at night to attack them. All the men and women were massacred, all the boys and girls were carried off and handed over to the French slave-dealer. Often when the slaves were got into boats the boats would be upset, and the poor creatures, all in irons, drowned.

The Krus, who are employed on steamers in West African ports for the discharge of cargoes brought from Europe and the taking on board of others, are physically a fine race, with a desire for improvement by way of education, and an evil reputation as drunkards and thieves. They are, according to Mr. R. C. F. Maugham, British Consul-General at Monrovia, and author of an entertaining and instructive book about the country, "enthusiasts for religion," and many of them become clergymen. In Mr. Maugham's opinion, however, the tribes which profess Islam are more worthy of respect than the native Christians.

### Mandingo Dignity and Mpesse Skill

The Mandingos especially, and the Vai, a branch of the Mandingo stock, are spoken of with liking and admiration. They appear to be of Arab blood; this is noticeable in their dignified bearing, in their courtesy, and in their determined adherence to their ancient dress. The Krumen are delighted to get hold of boots, hats, or tweed suits, usually of shoddy and atrocious cut. They rig themselves out in the most grotesque costumes. The Moslems wear flowing garments, clean linen, a small round cap; and their manners match their taste in dress.

The largest native tribe in Liberia is a race of hunters called the Mpesse or Kpwesi, who live entirely according to their own standards and customs. Their villages are clean, their houses

tidy, they cultivate large areas, and are always well supplied with food. The women make a fine cloth at their hand-loom from the cotton which they pick themselves from wild plants. They used to smelt the iron for their weapons and hoes until they found they could get it with less trouble by purchase. Unfortunately they, too, are slave-sellers, and are ready to hand over even their near relations for a price. They do not sell to white men. That traffic has been made too dangerous. Their trade with other tribes.

### Official Attitude Towards Slavery

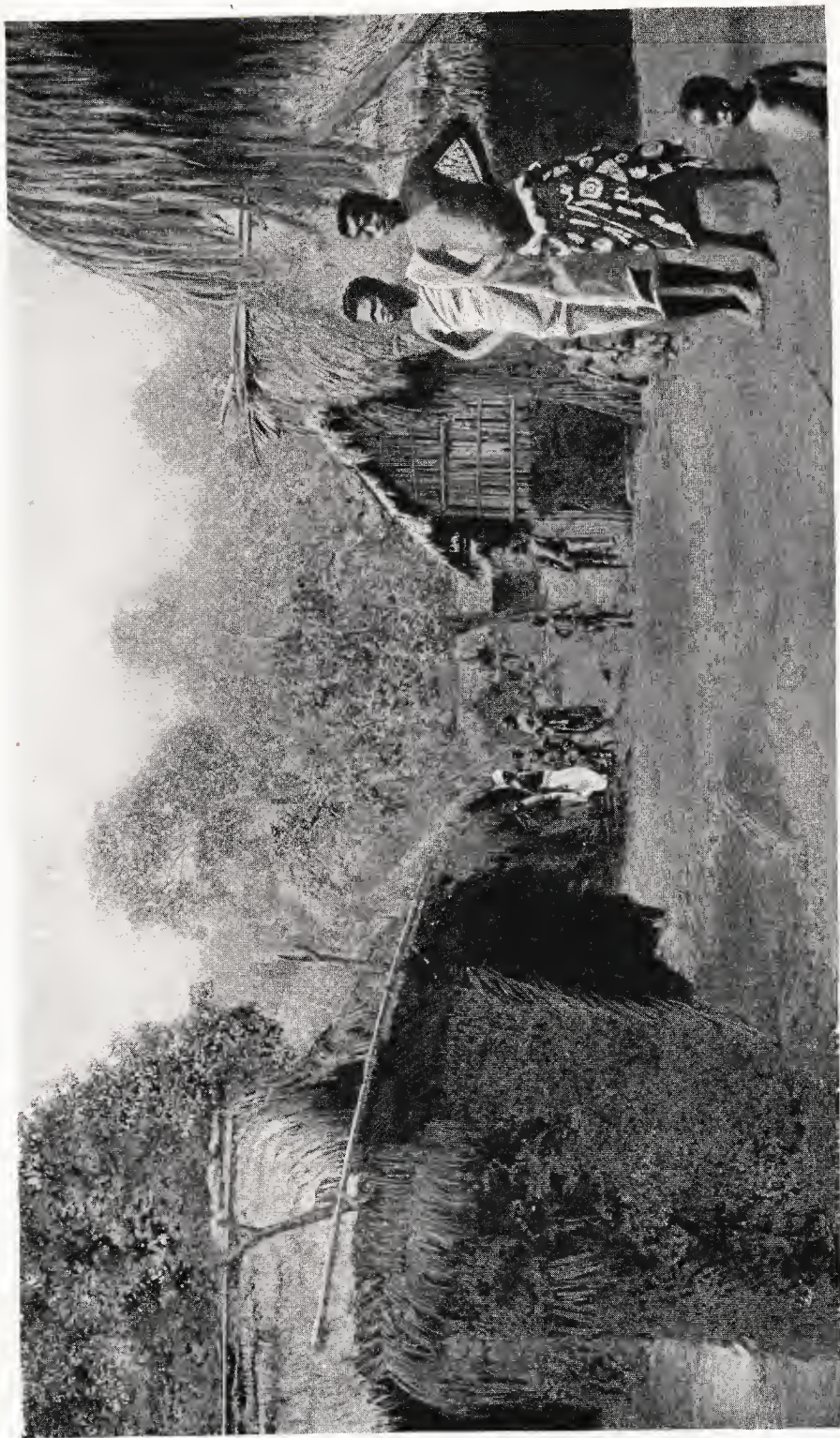
Slavery is not so shocking when the slaves are in their own country and under masters of their own colour. They are not, at any rate, looked down upon as inferior flesh and blood. They may be treated as members of the family. But it is certain that as soon as the Liberian Government can assert its authority over all the tribes in its territory, slave-dealing will be put down.

At present the Government can do little either to control or enlighten these tribes. Yet it must not be supposed that even those which are most remote are entirely without education. They have none, according to the sense in which the word has come to be used among Europeans; that is to say, their minds are not stuffed with information of a varied and, for the most part, useless nature. But it is pretty well established that among most of the African native races there exist systems which train boys and girls for the duties and difficulties of life.

### Native Systems of Education

In the British colony of Sierra Leone two such systems have been discovered and inquired into. One is concerned with the preparation of women for the care of their homes and of children; the other instructs young men as to the traditions, methods of warfare, dances and songs, passwords and secret signs, superstitions and ritual observances of the





PLEASANT INDOLENCE IN THE SUNSHINE FALLING ADOWN THE STREET OF A LIBERIAN VILLAGE

Liberian inland villages are often stockaded, and comprise both round and oblong houses. The former are made of clay worked into a wattle framework and plastered inside and out with mud. Oblong houses are walled with slabs of palm midribs, or with palm fronds worked into a wattle framework, and are often partitioned into three rooms with a ceiling forming the floor of a loft under the roof. All are thatched with palm fronds, leaves, reeds, or grass. Nearly all villages have a half-



tribe. These systems have existed as far back as we can peer into the darkness of the African Continent. Dr. Wilmot Blyden, an authority on the West African negro, considered that the native course of training for girls gave more satisfactory results than those which are pursued in many European schools.

The lessons in cookery, which are included in the girls' education, are simple. The natives live chiefly on rice and manioc, on vegetables cooked with palm-oil, fish, and occasionally fowls. Meat they get very seldom. Even in Monrovia it is difficult to procure regular supplies of any but tinned meat. In a hot climate, however, most people are better without it; but, unfortunately, little is done as yet in the way of growing substitutes for meat.

Liberia in 1822, like Sierra Leone in 1786, owed its inception to philanthropic effort designed to repatriate descendants of plantation slaves. Its origin has been traced to an American divine, the Rev. Samuel Hopkins; but its actual founder was the American Colonisation Society, which had Henry Clay, the abolitionist, and President Monroe, as supporters. First settlements were made round the mouth of the Mesurado (Montserrado) river on land acquired from native chiefs. The last white man to exercise authority was Thomas Buchanan, the original governor, who retired in 1837.

The story of the slow progress of Liberia is punctuated, like that of the



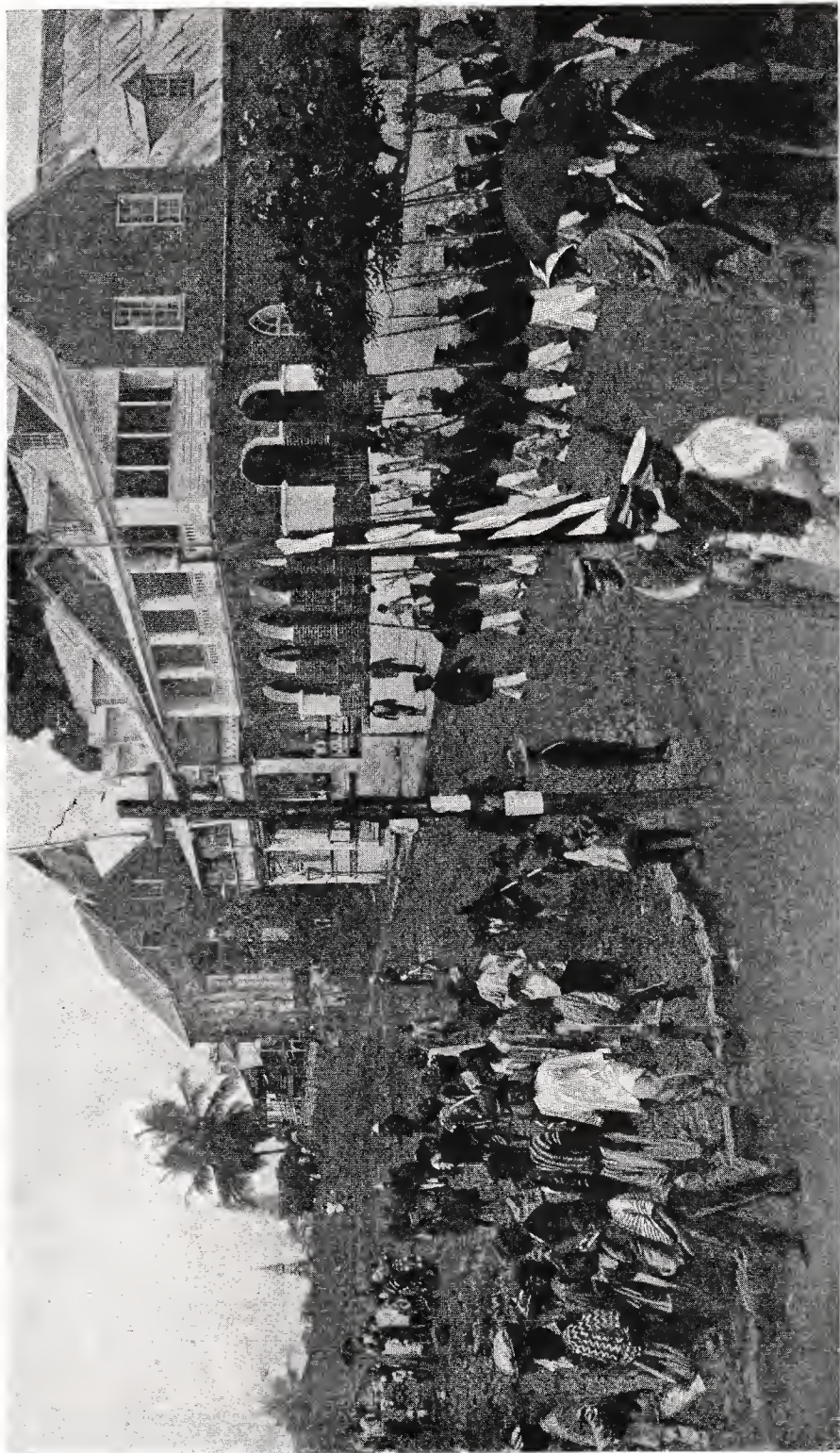
ALL DRESSED UP IN THEIR SUNDAY BEST

Manchester goods find a ready sale in certain parts of Liberia where the aboriginal tribes form the bulk of the population. Many a native will consider himself adequately clothed even by the dignity of a top-hat

early settlers in America, by troubles with the indigenous tribes. When the early settlers had made their footing secure, they found other enemies. They were anxious to put an end to the infamous traffic in slaves which was carried on all along that part of the African coast. This brought them into conflict with the Spaniards and the French. The French Government also drew upon itself the resentment of the colonists by encroaching on their territory.

Declared independent in July, 1847, with a constitution modelled on that of

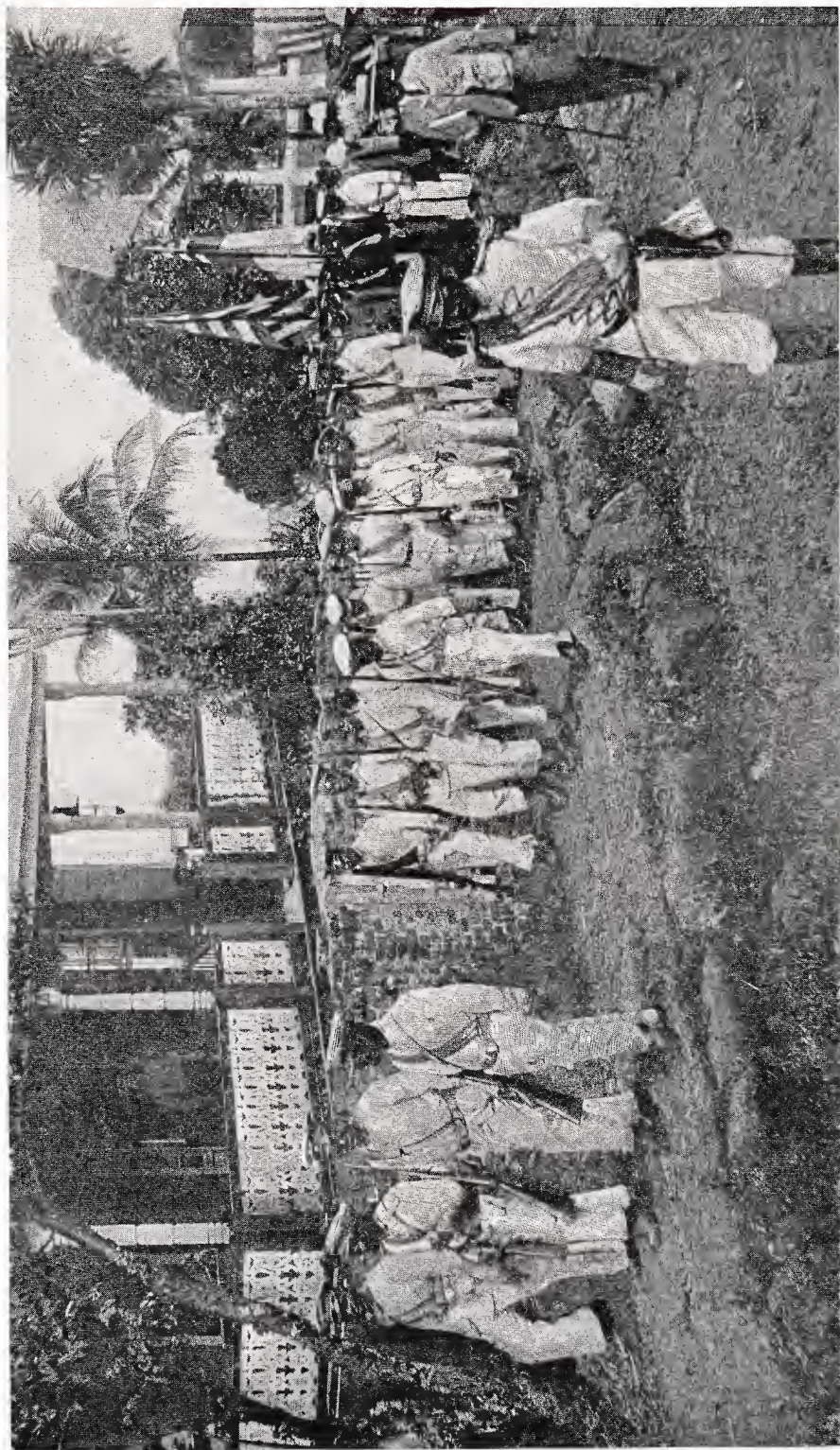




# LIBERIA'S PRESIDENT PASSES BY WITH FULL MILITARY HONOURS IN MONROVIA

Beneath the white piazzas or balconies of the Executive Mansion, the official residence of the Liberian premier, march the dark-uniformed guards escorting their president who walks beneath an umbrella directly behind the colours. Even outside this, the republic's "White House," grass and weeds impinge upon the thoroughfare, and it is no uncommon thing for goats, sheep, and even cattle to find pasturage right in the heart of the capital. This, built in five streets along the shore of the Mesurado Lagoon, lies pleasantly on the side of a hill





#### PICKED TROOPS OF LIBERIA'S ARMY THAT MAINTAIN ORDER IN THE WILD INTERIOR

To cope adequately with the more unruly elements among the tribes that people the hills and forests of Liberia's hinterland, a body of soldiery has been raised, known as the Liberian Frontier Force. Sections are stationed at various points as need may require. The officers of the regiment have been drawn from among the coloured portions of the United States army, and under their tutelage an increased standard of discipline, smartness, and efficiency is being built up and a regular system of payment inaugurated. A troop of these men is here shown with their colours





# ODDS AND ENDS OF EUROPEAN HABILIMENTS ENHANCE THE RHYTHMIC GESTURES OF THE DANCE

Though many tribes of Liberia's tropic hinterland still remain but little affected by the culture and economic advancement of the coloured colonists from the United States who settled the coast, yet these aboriginal tribes provide a fruitful market for the vender of brightly-coloured stuffs as well as European hats and boots. The dusky villagers seen just about to dance have a certain irrepressible gaiety of spirit and vivid memories annex strongly to their mind. To many.



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the U.S.A., Liberia was recognized by the European Powers in 1848-1849, and by the U.S.A. in 1862. The German Government in 1879 threatened to bombard its chief town if payment was not immediately made of an indemnity for the plundering by Krumen of a German ship wrecked on its shore. The sum claimed—£900—was not excessive, seeing that the blacks had not merely cleared out the ship, but had stolen the passengers' clothes and made them walk a long distance with next to nothing on. But, small as the amount demanded seems, the Liberian Treasury did not contain anything like so much money at the moment.

Hastily the President and his Ministers made a collection among the traders of the capital and saved it from destruction. The Kru villages in the neighbourhood of the wreck were bombarded without the option of a fine, but the natives would not learn to respect property, and continued to regard vessels driven ashore on their coasts as treasure trove, much as the Cornish folk of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did, though the Africans were never accused of deliberately enticing ships to their doom in the Cornish manner, by false lights.

The financial straits in which the Government so frequently found itself were due in large part to the manner in which the Republic was treated by London bankers over a loan arranged in 1871. On paper this loan represented



**KRU HUNTER OUT AFTER BIG GAME**

Elephants, leopards, and buffaloes are the quarry for which he chiefly uses his gun. Other beasts he kills in pitfalls or with weighted harpoons poised above their path to water, and small game for his larder he traps

the sum of £100,000. So slight was the belief in Liberia's credit that it was issued at seventy. This brought it down to £70,000. Then the bankers deducted three years' interest to be held as caution money. Further, they charged highly for their expenses. The sum that was paid into the treasury, never estimated at more than £27,000, has been put as low as £17,000.

Before the proceeds of the loan were placed in the coffers of the State, however, deduction had to be made on



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FLOATING BRIDGE THAT SPANS THE FLOOD

Swirling turgidly, the St. Paul river breaks the gloomy track that threads these dark and almost impenetrable woods. Resting mostly on the water runs this rude log structure, held together only by ropes, across which move the laden porters

account of goods bought by the President and charged against it. These had cost some £14,000, and when the news of the President's behaviour reached the country it caused an outcry of anger against him, and he was imprisoned to await trial. He succeeded in escaping, but was drowned as he was getting on board a ship in disguise.

This unfortunate loan hung round the neck of Liberia for a great many years. In the end the country was obliged to agree that interest should be paid on £80,000. In 1919 the United States granted the State a loan which extinguished all previous borrowings, and since then the Republic has become independent of any other Power in the financial sense.

The American Government, although it declined to set up a Protectorate over Liberia, has always taken an interest in the experiment conceived and made by American citizens. The Frontier Force which Liberia keeps up for preserving order among the native tribes consists mainly of black soldiers from the American army, and it is under the command of American officers. Besides this force, there is a militia, but that cannot be taken seriously, nor is it needed for any purpose save that of ceremonial. The uniforms which the members of it wear, and the weapons



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which they carry are so various as to be amusing to Europeans, though they are sufficiently imposing to Liberian eyes.

Cultivation has not been carried very far, even for the wants of the Liberians.

The chief products up to now have been palm-oil and palm-kernels, rubber, cacao (from which both cocoa and chocolate are made), and coffee. Liberian coffee has an excellent reputation for flavour. The tall shrubs from which the berries are picked grow wild, and the plantations of them require little attention. The rubber which Liberia exports is mostly from wild trees. There might also be a big export of copra, the dried white lining of the coconut, which is used in so many processes of manufacture—margarine, soap, candles, and fine lubricating oils—but the coconut tree is scarcely cultivated at all, though it grows so well in its wild state.

Cotton is another crop which could be cultivated with profit. Tobacco would grow well; vanilla has been suggested as a possibility. At present, however, there is not enough labour for a vigorous expansion of industry. Of the natives the larger number are contented with their lives in villages far remote from white civilization. Nothing so far has induced them to leave their homes and sell their labour. The mixed population which is the result of marriages between the original settlers and the natives is more inclined to work than the indigenous tribesmen. Some of them, and some even of the

aboriginals, find their way into the class from which the governing men of the Republic are drawn.

Cattle-breeding possibilities in the savanna plateau are immense. The



**WOMEN OF A FINE MAHOMEDAN RACE**

Among the numerous tribes in Liberia the Vai stand out noticeably both by keeping to their native costume which, as can be seen, is a graceful one and in having invented their own system of writing. They form a branch of the Mandingo race

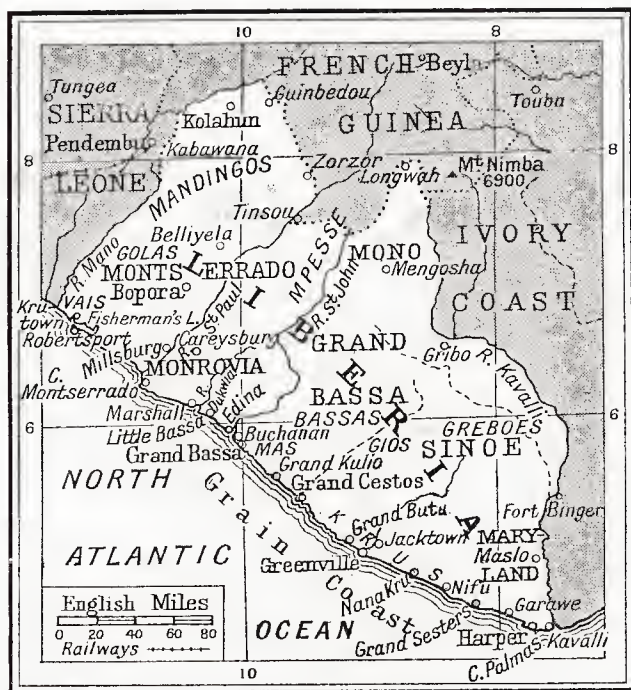
mountains are believed to be a storehouse of mineral deposits—iron, copper, corundum, mica, zinc, even gold and precious stones. The forests are rich in valuable timber. The fisheries are undeveloped. The fauna includes large herds of elephants (a potential source of much ivory), buffaloes, antelopes, hippopotami, leopards, monkeys, and pigs. Only



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in the Mandingo country are horses and donkeys used as pack animals. Means of transport are for the rest confined to the broad backs of porters. Roads are few. Railway work begun at

written when the Republic was established in 1847, which makes itself heard through the turgid sentiment and the grandiloquent language in which the document was drawn up.



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Monrovia and Bopora, by a German firm, was stopped by the Great War. Postal arrangements are negligible, and there are no inland telegraphs. While the official currency is in dollars and cents, native payment is still made in kind in sticks of salt or in cowries, or in barter, a wife, for example, being worth about half a dozen brass kettles, fifteen kegs of powder, and a few pieces of cloth.

Although the hope expressed in the Liberian Declaration of Independence that immigration from the United States would continue has not been fulfilled, the small number of American negroes who form the nucleus of the State is gradually extending its ideals of citizenship and widening the area within which may be found men capable of advancing the interests of the country.

There is a ring of pathos and of nobility in that Declaration of Independence,

In coming to the shores of Africa we indulged the pleasing hope that we should be permitted to exercise and improve those faculties which impart to man his dignity—to nourish in our hearts the flame of honourable ambition, to cherish and indulge those aspirations which a beneficent Creator has implanted in every human heart, and to evince to all who despise, ridicule, and oppress our race that we possess with them a common nature, are with them susceptible of equal refinement, and capable of equal advancement in all that adorns and dignifies man.

We were animated with the hope that here we should be at liberty to train up our children in the way they should go, to inspire them with a love of an honourable fame, to kindle within them the flame of a lofty philanthropy, and to form strong within them the principles of humanity, virtue, and religion.

Not all these ideals, genuine in spite of their ill-sounding verbiage, have been reached, but, as already suggested, the African negro republic, taking into account its difficulties, can hardly be blamed for not doing more. Rather should it be approved and encouraged for having done so much. Its continued existence is, indeed, a proof of vitality unusual even among colonies founded by whites.

Liberia joined the Allies in the Great War on May 8, 1917, and so gained its long-denied freedom from the Germans, who had secured 70 per cent. of its trade and had established a powerful wireless station at Monrovia. The Republic was one of the signatories of the Treaty of Peace at Versailles and an original member of the League of Nations.